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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001681

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

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TAGS: IR KPAL LE PBTS PTER SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: FOREIGN MINISTER SALLOUKH DEFENDS HIZBALLAH AND SYRIA IN MEETING WITH CT COORDINATOR CRUMPTON

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section: 1.4 (d)

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SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) In a May 23 meeting with Counterterrorism Coordinator Henry Crumpton, the Ambassador, and econoff, Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh -- in an unusually belligerent and offensive performance -- steadfastly defended Hizballah. He claimed that the majority of Lebanese consider Hizballah to be a "resistance movement," not a terrorist organization. He denied Hizballah was involved in criminal and terrorist activity outside of Lebanon. Salloukh expected the National Dialogue to discuss Hizballah's arms on June 8. According to Salloukh, Hizballah would consider disarmament only under two conditions: a Lebanese military capable of defending the country from Israel, and an Israeli withdrawal from Shebaa Farms. When the Ambassador noted the lack of progress on Palestinian militias on which there was National Dialogue consensus, Salloukh replied that the issue needed more time. As his staff avoided eye contact with their American visitors, Salloukh claimed Syria fully respected Lebanese sovereignty. The needed return of a calm atmosphere between the two "sisterly" countries should start with the end of the Lebanese media campaign against Syria. Crumpton and the Ambassador ended the meeting by emphasizing that the GOL needs to make some progress on UNSC resolutions soon to reassure the international community. End summary.

SALLOUKH: HIZBALLAH  
IS A "RESISTANCE"

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¶2. (C) On May 23, Counterterrorism Coordinator Henry Crumpton, the Ambassador, and econoff met with Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh, accompanied by three MFA officials. Salloukh, dispensing quickly with opening pleasantries, immediately took the offensive by offering a defense of Hizballah as a "resistance" group against Israel. Salloukh recited how Israel once occupied Lebanon up to Beirut and then remained in about 15 percent of the Lebanon until 2000. He noted that Israel still occupied the Shebaa Farms, which he claimed was Lebanese territory. The majority of Lebanese, Salloukh argued, consider Hizballah a "very respected and honored resistance movement," not a terrorist organization. He denied that Hizballah is involved in criminal and terrorist activity outside of Lebanon. Hizballah would not support criminal acts, Salloukh asserted. He added that Israel launched more air violations than normal in early May for no apparent reason.

¶3. (C) Salloukh expected the issue of Hizballah's arms to

be discussed in detail when the national dialogue resumes on June 8. Crumpton commented that Hizballah will have to choose whether it will become a part of Lebanese politics or continue to do the bidding of Iran. Salloukh asserted that Hizballah was already involving itself in Lebanese politics. Hizballah "has the most honest and clean ministers" and they work very hard, he proclaimed. Salloukh denied that Hizballah did Iran's bidding, claiming as evidence Hizballah Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassim's recent public statements that Hizballah would not fight for Iran's nuclear program unless Israel attacked Lebanon first. When Crumpton expressed disbelief, Salloukh claimed that only two issues need be resolved for Hizballah to disarm. First, build up the Lebanese military to address the military imbalance with Israel. Second, secure an Israeli withdrawal from Shebaa Farms. Crumpton replied that many in the U.S. are asking why the USG should provide Lebanon with assistance until it shows progress on UNSC resolutions. Salloukh said that the issue just needed some time.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador raised the lack of progress on disarming Palestinian militias outside the camps as an example of the GOL's inaction on UNSC resolutions. As demonstrated in the National Dialogue, the Lebanese are unanimous on this issue, and yet there still is no progress. Salloukh noted that there are 300,000 to 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon. Although he condemned the killing of a Lebanese soldier at the hands of Palestinian militants, Salloukh said the issue must be handled carefully to avoid another civil war. The Ambassador noted that two months have elapsed into the six-month deadline for Palestinian disarmament outside the camps imposed by the cabinet. This too needed more time, replied Salloukh.

BEIRUT 00001681 002 OF 002

SALLOUKH: SYRIA NOT THREATENING  
LEBANESE SOVEREIGNTY

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¶5. (C) Turning to the issue of relations with Syria, Salloukh proclaimed that Lebanon and Syria are "sisterly countries." He acknowledged that there is some disagreement on the delineation of the Lebanese-Syrian border, but insisted that it was natural for two neighboring countries to have some border disputes. "There is Lebanese land in Syria, and Syrian land in Lebanon," Salloukh explained. Salloukh identified the real problem as the poisoned atmosphere, which Salloukh blamed on a negative media campaign in Lebanon directed at Syria. If a calm atmosphere were to return, then solutions to these issues would be found. When Crumpton asked Salloukh if Syria respects Lebanese sovereignty, Salloukh replied: "Yes, of course." The Ambassador raised Syrian links to the Palestinian militants that shot and killed a Lebanese soldier. Fighters and arms are infiltrating Lebanon from Syria. Salloukh replied nonchalantly that the GOL condemns the action. When pressed further, Salloukh said the issue of how to disarm the Palestinian bases is for the military to decide.

¶6. (C) Crumpton and the Ambassador emphasized that the GOL must make some progress on UNSC resolutions in order to reassure the international community that the GOL is committed to progress. Terrorist organizations have found a safe haven in Lebanon. Lebanon must meet its UNSC obligations. Salloukh replied that Lebanon will not cut its ties to Syria and Iran, but denied that Lebanon is a servant of the two countries.

COMMENT

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¶7. (C) Salloukh, in meetings with USG officials, usually affects a certain formal cordiality, even when (as is usually the case) there is, either explicit or just below the surface, considerable disagreement between him and us. He

often comes across as someone striving, above all, to be "proper," perhaps a reflection that, yanked out of a slumbering retirement by Amal and Hizballah to take this ministerial position, he is truly a throw-back to an earlier era of diplomacy. Knowing that he reports his conversations to his Shia masters in Hizballah and Amal, we usually confine our conversations with him to non-controversial subjects and then deal directly and more constructively with PM Siniora, Saad Hariri, and others on Hizballah and Syria-related topics. As if acceding to an unwritten agreement, Salloukh likewise usually steers clear of politically dangerous territory with us. Showing some unexpected capacity for independent thought and constructive behavior, he even publicly defended PM Siniora from Hizballah and Syriab-originated criticism after Siniora's September 2005 and March 2006 visits to Washington.

¶8. (C) But in the meeting with Ambassador Crumpton, Salloukh opened with a direct salvo regarding Hizballah. Throughout the meeting, he came across as unusually belligerent and hostile. Until Ambassador Crumpton pointedly asked him to stop, Salloukh repeatedly interrupted his visitors' responses to his diatribe. Salloukh's defense of Hizballah and Syria -- which went in tone and (insupportable) content far beyond what is standard in Shia/pro-Syrian circles in Lebanon -- seemed to embarrass his MFA professional staff, who stared at their shoes during the worst of the exchange to avoid eye contact with the Americans. We conclude that Salloukh -- probably uncomfortable to receive Ambassador Crumpton in the first place -- cleared his meeting with Hizballah and was given instructions of what to say and how. Subsequently, questioned by PM Siniora, Salloukh (according to a Siniora aide) peddled the lie that Ambassadors Crumpton and Feltman had "instructed" Lebanon to break off all ties with Syria, an "unacceptable U.S. diktat" that allegedly provoked Salloukh's tough response. When the MFA's Americas Director Ghady el-Khoury was informed that this was the worst meeting that Embassy Beirut had ever experienced with Salloukh, el-Khoury (one of the shoe-gazers during the meeting) responded that it was the worst meeting he had ever attended, period.

FELTMAN